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# The Phoenix

Number 3 November 1986

For contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Compiled and distributed by Michael C. Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

## INTRODUCTION

1986 is clearly the year that the Atlas took off. Many more reports have been received this year than in the first two years of the project; so much so that I now have a backlog of well over a hundred report sheets awaiting processing. Also it is very encouraging to see the number of references and acknowledgements to the Atlas appearing in journals and the ornithological press. Donations have come from all quarters but costs have spiralled too, whilst proper sponsorship has remained elusive.

This issue of *Phoenix* is the biggest yet, in fact twice as big as No. 2. However it has proved to be a very costly in time to produce and unless there is a considerable injection of cash to enable it to be produced more easily next time, e.g. by word processor, then No. 4 will have to be shorter or of a lesser standard or production. I hope it will not be necessary to step back in this way, especially as this issue includes, for the first time, great chunks of copy submitted by atlascers and readers. Alternatively perhaps a reader would like to take over the Editorship of *Phoenix* and leave me free to carry on with the administration of the project and process the records received?

My many grateful thanks go to all those who have assisted me in so many ways over the past year,

Michael Jennings.

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## NEW BREEDING SPECIES

Henceforth all species which are recorded breeding in Arabia for the first time will be dealt with under this column. Observers are urged to submit detailed accounts of first breeding for publication.

### Pale Rock Sparrow \* *Petronia brachydactyla* 1601

The Pale Rock Sparrow breeds over a wide band of semi-desert and steppe from Lebanon and south east Turkey through Syria, Iraq and much of Iran. It winters mainly in coastal areas of south west Arabia and north east Africa, e.g. Sudan and Eritrea. It is known over much of Arabia as a somewhat erratic visitor, with no pattern or regularity as to the places where it occurs or numbers present each year. I know them best from observations whilst I was at Riyadh 1975-77 where they mainly occurred as spring migrants (March-May) usually in small groups but sometimes in flocks of 50-200. In autumn they occurred less regularly and almost always in August, when once 300 were seen together, with a few in early September. (In August and September 1975, 22 out of 28 birds examined in the hand, had suspended moult of the flight feathers, which is a good indication that birds were actively migrating rather than a local post-breeding flock).

There have been a very small number of Arabian observations of this species which suggest that the species might possibly breed. At Riyadh in 1976 I observed three males singing on the perimeter fence of the airbase on 29-30 April. The next month, on the Tuwaiq Escarpment (MA26) 50 km to the west of Riyadh a single male sang 21-25 May. The latter bird had gone by 30 May but others were seen in the general vicinity during June, and on 3 July an adult female was trapped for ringing and found to have a brood patch which was starting to down over (down feathers in the waxy sheath). This indicates that incubation had been completed only recently, although not necessarily in the area where the bird was trapped. At Hatab (UA11), Jebal al Qara, Dhofar Province, Oman. F.J. Walker observed a single bird on 22 February 1978 for 30 minutes building a crude nest in the fork of a thorn tree. However, the nest was found to be deserted six days later. In the Musandam Peninsula (UA29), northern Oman, in April 1983, M.D. Gallagher heard a male singing and considered that the species possibly bred there that year.

From 4-10 & 18-19 March this year I was atlas-sing in central regions of Saudi Arabia. I found this bird singing in 12 of 19 atlas squares from near the Harrat Khaybar (c.a. FB28) to Hail (HB32) and Jebels Aja (HA31) and Selma (1A31). (A rectangle roughly 340 km by 170 km). In many places they were common, sometimes even the most numerous species present, with males singing only 50-100 m apart over a wide area. Males seemed to particularly favour singing from a prominent rock or bush, the most typical habitat where they were found was the edge of plains around rock outcrops or in wadi beds. Some indications of density of singing males can be taken from half hour sample censuses at Jebel Selma which revealed nine singing birds in 700 m of wadi bed and plain edge, and at 130 km west of Hail where nine singing birds were also found, but spread over 1200 m of open plain. The song is a wheezy trill reminiscent of the 'chee-eese' notes ending the song of the Yellow Bunting *Emberiza citrinella*. It can also resemble the wheezing breeding call of the Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* or even the song of the Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*. It is a grating little song which quickly becomes rather monotonous, especially as no other more interesting 'breeding' activities such as courtship-chasing, nest building or copulation

\* Scientific names of all species included in the project and their reference numbers are given on Form 2. (An interim list of the breeding birds of Arabia - issued free to all contributors and available on request). The names of other species and additions to the list are given in full. To save space localities mentioned in the text (except major towns), are suffixed by the appropriate Atlas square reference and these can be seen on Fig. 3. Bibliographic references are kept to the minimum and are given in abbreviated form.

were observed. Birds were not even noticeably in pairs and it seemed to me that it was only the males that had come into breeding condition and that breeding was not to be progressed in Arabia before their departure.

Moving west from Hail on 11th March the country became progressively more arid and the Pale Rock Sparrow was no longer recorded. Indeed none were seen at all in the next 8 days whilst I travelled in Midian and along the Red Sea coast. However, moving back into the area on 18th March from the direction of Maidn Salah (DB30) they were seen again in square EB29. A survey the next morning revealed six singing males in 800 m of the wadi bed where I had camped.

Whilst packing up the camp site my attention was drawn to a single Pale Rock Sparrow which was unusually confiding and uttered a single plaintive note at intervals. It was not a call I had heard before and I considered that it was an anxiety note and that perhaps the camp site had disturbed the bird from its nest. There was much dead wood lying around and several small plants and bushes and a search very soon revealed an unconcealed nest not 3 m from the vehicle. The nest contained three small chicks about three or four days old but sadly the very close proximity of the camp had evidently prevented the adults from brooding during the night and the young were dead. The adult did not visit the nest after I withdrew from the camp site so I could not be sure that the bird owned the deserted nest and dead young although this seemed almost certain. During the morning's census I had been most puzzled to find a deserted nest containing a single white speckled egg which obviously did not belong to any other resident bird in the wadi. This nest was identical to the one with the dead young. Furthermore at another spot in the same wadi a single egg shell fragment was found which matched the single egg in the unidentified nest. My travelling companion Sheila Coll- enette, finally tied together all the evidence by finding another nest in an acacia seedling with an adult tightly incubating. This nest contained four eggs identical to the single egg. Therefore there were at least three nests (possibly a fourth, unfound, represented by the eggshell fragment) in about 300 m of the wadi.

Details of the breeding of this species are poorly recorded and therefore full details of the notes made in respect of these nests are given. The site and construction of the three nests was very similar. The first nest (the one with the chicks) was 5 cm off ground level and built into the north east side of an annual herb *Echium longifolium*. It was rather bulky and untidy on the exterior, being mainly constructed of dry, straight acacia twigs and lined with the downy plant heads of *Gnaphalium luteum*. The second nest (with the single egg) was situated like the first nest in the flat wadi bed about the same height off the ground and also facing north east but this time it was built into the herb *Forskalia tenacissima*. The construction was the same as the first nest but the lining in addition to the downy plant heads included some fine grasses and a few animal hairs. The third nest was built 22 cm off the ground in a small open acacia seedling and constructed and lined as the first nest. The eggs were glossy white with a few delicate dark brown or black spots, irregularly scattered over the surface. The chicks were generally naked with tufts of yellowish-cream down-hairs on the head and body.

If the wadi where breeding was confirmed was representative of the whole area where this bird was found singing in March 1986, then clearly a great number bred in Arabia this year. The question must be asked; has the bird always bred in this part of Arabia? Or was this merely an opportunist breeding occurrence made possible by the exceptional rains the area received in late 1985 and early 1986, which provided bountiful food sources for adults and young?

#### BREEDING EXOTICS

A note in *Phoenix* 1 draws attention to the potential importance of reporting exotic breeding species which may have been liberated or have escaped from captivity. The list of feral breeding species grows yearly, which is not at all surprising considering the huge numbers and variety of birds that can be found for sale in pet shops throughout the peninsula. It is important to keep a comprehensive record of breeding exotic birds as some could very easily become established and, for example, be shown to be agricultural pests, displace naturally occurring species or worse still, threaten the few endemic species of Arabia. It is true that some species have found ecological niches that have not hitherto been exploited by native birds (e.g. the various mynah species now in many towns) and apparently pose no problem. However, others may already be causing trouble, for example the Black Kite has now apparently been displaced in Aden as the city scavenger by the Indian House Crow. Rose-ringed Parakeets are thought to be competing with Rock Doves for nesting sites in some areas. All breeding records of exotic species or interesting interspecific relationships with native birds should be reported on Form 3.

Reports are now available on two more members of the parrot family that have bred in Arabia:

#### Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* 2008

The Budgerigar, a native of arid regions of Australia, has become a popular cage bird throughout the world and readily breeds in captivity. Escapes have often been seen in Arabia and reports have been received that they bred feral in Salalah (UA11), Oman in March 1967 (J. Hulbert) and Doha, Qatar in June 1984 (M. Hutton), the latter nest rearing young.

#### Sulphur Crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* 2017

A pair of adults with three young birds were seen in a Jeddah garden during April 1985 (R. Priscott).

#### REPORTING PROCEDURES

Now that the Atlas has been running for three seasons some irregular practices of contributors are coming to light that are causing processing difficulties. The most common problem is that some contributors, in a laudable desire to economise in the use of report forms, are inserting more than one record per line on Form 3. This is usually done by showing a species occurring in two or more squares on a single line of Col. 3. This practice requires the extra records to be rewritten during processing, as all report forms have to be got into an acceptable format for computerization in due course. Will all contributors please remember to show each record on a separate line on Form 3. Another common and similar problem is to show more than one date in Col. 5 of Form 3. This is usually done in a desire to indicate the whole period for which observations were gained. This is relevant information but it ought to appear as a note in the remarks column or on the reverse. Where observations extend over a period the date to be shown in Col. 5 should be the most representative for the Breeding Evidence Code shown. Please also remember to show the date in numerical style e.g. 28.4.86 (day, month, year). If the date of a record is for any reason imprecise, then show the year only (e.g. 0.0.86) or month and year (e.g. 0.4.86) and add any extra comments, such as 'Spring 86' or 'Jan-Apr 86' in the remarks column.

#### New Form 2

A new edition of Form 2 (list of Arabian breeding birds) is in preparation and will be issued to current contributors shortly. This

list will be brought up to date with the addition of new species recently found breeding and the removal of others whose breeding status in Arabia is now suspect. Ostrich has been taken off the list as, sadly, it must now be regarded as extinct in Arabia. The new list has been enhanced with some details to indicate the breeding season of birds, such as the months eggs and young have been found in the nest. Hopefully the extra information will help contributors interpret more easily the Breeding Evidence Code for birds in their local squares.

#### Atlas Coverage: Tiran Island

The islands of Tiran and Sinafir lie at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, largely occupying square AB32 but also partly extending into AA33, AB33 and AA32. The islands were originally excluded from coverage of the atlas but it is now clear that on geographical, political and of course ornithological grounds they must be included as an integral part of the Arabian Peninsula. The islands were incorporated into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by King Ibn Saud, but since 1967, they have, mainly for strategic reasons, been administered by Egypt. The islands were occupied for a short time by Israeli forces in the late 1960s and 1970s. The squares that the islands occupy are also shared with the *Egyptian Ornithological Atlas* project organised by P.L. Meininger and W.C. Mullie in Holland, who have very kindly forwarded details of birds breeding on these islands for ABBA use. Birds known to have bred on the islands include Little Green Heron, Reef Heron, Spoonbill, Osprey, Sooty-Falcon, Barbary Falcon, Kentish Plover, White-eyed Gull, Caspian Tern, Lesser Crested Tern, White-cheeked Tern and Brown-necked Raven. Possible breeding species include Crested Lark, Pale Crag Martin and Mourning Wheatear.

#### Standardisation of Place Names

One problem that bedevils those researching any aspect of the Arabian region is the confusion and fluidity of the spelling of Arabic place names in English. Arabic just does not transliterate consistently and precisely into written English, and the problem is increased by some authors who invent their own personal variation for the spelling of a locality. In an effort to standardise as far as possible on the place names used in the administration of the Atlas, including publications, the place names cited in the series of gazetteers published by the U.S. Board of Geographical Names (Defence Mapping Agency) will be followed wherever this is practicable. This will be a progressive process on the pages of *Phoenix* as funds have only become available so far to purchase the gazetteers for Bahrain, Oman, South Yemen and North Yemen (a total of 25,900 place names). The Saudi Arabian gazetteer (costing \$69.00 with 20,800 place names) will be bought next when cash is available. Individual contributors need not worry at all about the names they use in their reports, providing no ambiguity can arise, as all records will be 'translated' to the proper place names during processing. (However, if anyone is interested in the subject, details of the gazetteers, and how to order them, will be supplied on request).

#### DOVES UPDATE

A short account of the recent range extensions in Arabia of three species of doves, Eurasian Collared Dove, Palm Dove and Namaqua Dove, appears in *Phoenix* 2. In the last 12 months these species have continued to turn up in new areas. The Namaqua Dove reached Qatar in 1985 (M. Hutton). (There is an old undocumented record from the 1960s). The Eurasian Collared Dove has been seen this year in Taima (EA32) and Hail in north west Saudi Arabia (M.C.J.) and the Palm Dove has been seen in Riyadh since May 1985 (and has now bred there

successfully- A.J. Stagg) and at Jubail (PB31) this spring. (C. Saunders). A few African Collared Doves were seen in Wabbah Crater (HA22) in March this year, (M.C.J.) the furthest north east record to date. Near Jebel Radwa (EA26) a species of collared dove was seen in March 1986 (M.C.J.) but they were not specifically identified and so it is now known whether they represented the furthest south record of the Eurasian species or the furthest north record of the African bird, either of which is possible. Watch this space! Finally the Olive Pigeon *Columba arquatrix* whose first Arabian occurrence was reported in *Phoenix* 2 was seen again, in late 1985, by the OSME Expedition to North Yemen. News of all developments in this continuing saga will be welcomed.

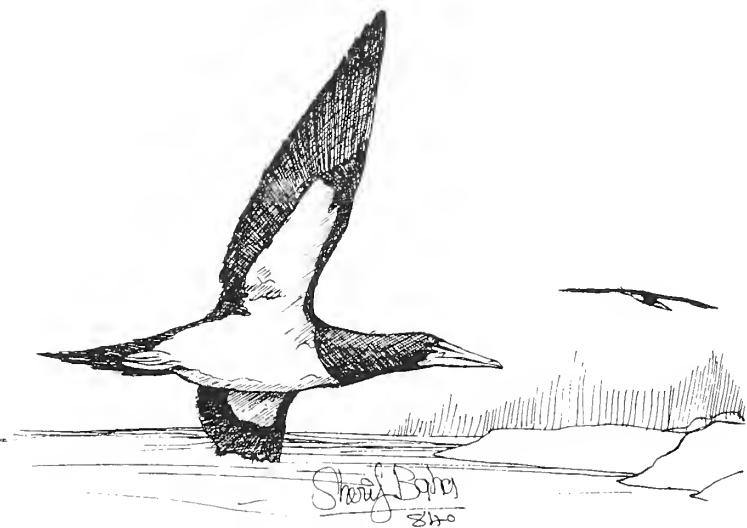


Fig 1. The Brown Booby is a species that probably has a sub-annual breeding cycle. (See 'Breeding Seasons', page 8). An estimated 10,000 have been seen around the Zubayr group of islands. (See 'Red Sea Expedition', page 8).

#### SITES OF INTEREST

The aim of this column is to present short studies of the breeding avifauna of individual places throughout the peninsula, as an indication of the diversity of habitats and bird communities that exist in Arabia. Further site accounts are invited from all those who have submitted records to the project who have studied a location reasonably well. It should be noted that these studies are not meant to be a catalogue of the best bird sites (although some of them are) and therefore a report of the bird life in a large city or from an area of very low species diversity is just as relevant.

#### Mangrove Conservation Areas at Yanbu al Sinaiyah, Saudi Arabia (EA24)

One of the most extensive mangrove stands along the Red Sea shoreline between Jeddah and the Gulf of Aqaba is to be found at the mouth of the Wadi Farah. It is also the site of a port and harbour complex serving the new industrial city of Yanbu al Sinaiyah (25 k. south of Yanbu al Bahr). Although the development has involved some destruction of the mangrove (they appear to consist solely of *Avicennia marina*) the government has designated three areas as Conservation Areas involving a total of about 11 k. of *Avicennia* dominated shore-line. They will be retained in their natural state and protected from disturbance.

The breeding status of herons in the Conservation Areas and their vicinity was assessed between May-July 1985. Nine species were seen and three were confirmed as breeding; Reef Heron (two colonies), Little Green Heron (two pairs - one confirmed breeding) and Purple Heron (possibly as many as three pairs - birds

seen collecting nest material and recently fledged young seen). Little Bitterns (adult and juveniles seen) almost certainly also breed. Night Herons, *Nycticorax nycticorax* Grey Herons and Goliath Herons were also candidates as possible breeders. Spoonbills also over-summered while several pairs of both the Clamorous Warbler and a small unstreaked (presumed *Acrocephalus*) warbler, held territories in the denser mangrove stands. Above the mature mangroves there is an area of mangrove seedlings reached only by the highest tides; this zone then merges with a mosaic of salt pans and sandy hummocks and hollows which supported at least 12 breeding pairs of Kentish Plovers and three pairs of Saunders' Little Terns. A Barbary Falcon was resident in June and July and was seen to attack terns on several occasions; frequent sightings of this species around new oil refineries during the summer suggests that it will not be long before they attempt to nest on one of the tall buildings in the industrial city. Displaying Caspian Terns and prospecting Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* were also present in this habitat in late May.

An artificially created island in a dredged area of sabkha adjacent to one of the Conservation Areas was found to hold 32 scattered nests of Saunders' Little Terns in early June while a compact colony of 25 pairs of White-cheeked Terns (apparently the first breeding record along the coast of the Arabian peninsula north of Jeddah) became established on the edge of the island four weeks later. A nearby coral islet held agitated Lesser Crested Terns but a landing was not feasible.

Ospreys also utilize the mangroves for nesting. They breed only during the winter (December-February). Three pairs have nested successfully in each of the past two winters of 1984/5 and 1985/6. Five nests have been found in stunted mangrove bushes and one on a buoy in the new port. *Brian S. Meadows, c/o. Amartech Ltd, P.O. Box 30227, Yanbu al Sinaiyah, Saudi Arabia.*

#### Wadi Boglar, Yemen Arab Republic (KA07, KA06)

This wadi runs down Yemen's western escarpment, the source being 30 k. south west of Sana. The wadi bed is reached by taking the Ta'izz road from Sana, then turning west off the road after 15 k., onto a track. This crosses a plain and ascends to the scarp ridge. From there downwards is the Wadi-Boglar catchment area and the twisting dirt road descends to the wadi itself (1800 m.). The track then follows the wadi bed up to 2100 m. or down to 1300 m. (2100-1300 m = 30 k.), where Wadi Boglar changes name and feeds eventually into Wadi Siham. The ridge of the escarpment is fairly level and runs north-south at 2600 m.; the scarp slopes are composed of all manner of large and small cliffs, step-like piedmonts, ridges, promontories, eroded ravines and steep hill sides. The vegetation is generally sparse and open, with a distinct floral boundary at c 2000 m., the frost-line. Above this there are few succulents, below they are common: the most characteristic is the giant candelabra "cactus" *Euphorbia ammak* of the cloud zone (1600-2200 m.). Rainfall decreases with decreasing altitude, and the slopes become barer, the vegetation sparser: typically there are scattered thorn-trees such as acacia and a ground flora of tough grasses, herbs and a few shrubs. In the humid wadi bed the vegetation is very different: here broad-leaved trees such as figs, are dotted along the banks, especially in coffee gardens where they are used for shade, and large clumps of tall grasses, rushes and "bamboo" are common. The wadi bed itself remains bare and rocky, whilst terraced silt banks are often found along the sides, these being intensively farmed for millet/sorghum, bananas and coffee. These fields and the wadi bed are dotted with *Zizyphus* trees. The wadi is full of human

activity, the surrounding slopes much less so, especially at lower levels. There are fish and frogs in the wadi stream, which runs for most of the year above ground; foxes and hares occur on the surrounding hill sides, as do Hamadryas Baboons in the isolated lower areas.

From experience of other scarp wadis, the birds I have recorded on my nine visits seem to be representative of the avifauna of the western escarpment in general. The most widespread breeding birds, found throughout the escarpment and wadi, are Arabian Red-legged Partridge, Palm Dove, Pale Crag Martin, Black-capped Bulbul, Graceful Prinia, Tristram's Grackle and the two ravens. Birds of the higher cliffs and stony slopes include Griffon Vulture, Barbary Falcon and Little and Alpine Swifts. A Lammergeier may be spotted cruising along the scarp ridge, and Long-legged Buzzards probably breed on the cliffs too. The breeding passerines include Desert Lark, Long-billed Pipit, Mourning Wheatear, Little Rock Thrush (where there are trees), Scrub Warbler, Orange-tufted Sunbird and African Rock Bunting. An old ruin provides a nesting site for a pair of Hoopoes; Yemen Linnets occur at the top of the scarp, not much further down than 2200 m. Equally restricted are Arabian and Yemen Serins - the former frequenting the greenery of springs and seepage areas, the latter preferring barren, rocky places. Two localised species are Richard's Pipit, seen in a flat, agricultural area at the head of the wadi, and Golden-winged Grosbeak, sighted once on the scarp in the cloud zone; this special bird's lifestyle seems closely tied to the succulent *Euphorbia* plants, especially *E. ammak*. Descending below the frost-line, the air becomes warmer and the birds more African. Blackstart makes its first appearance, together with breeding Ruppell's Weavers, at c 2000 m. Down in the wadi bed, new birds are Hammerkops, Bruce's Green Pigeons, Little Grey Hornbills and Shining Sunbirds. On the arid hillsides Little Green Bee-eaters and Great Grey Shrikes keep an alert watch. Red-rumped Swallows hawk around the occasional gate-like cliffs in the wadi, whilst in the *Zizyphus* trees of the wadi-spread weavers nest in profusion and Jacobin Cuckoos can be heard calling loudly. Dusky Turtle Doves extend down to 1500 m. from the highlands, whilst below c. 1400 m. a new group of birds is added: Grey-headed Kingfisher, White-throated Bee-eater, Black Bush Chat and African Silverbill. The latter can often be seen at midday, flying down from the cane-breaks to drink at the wadi-stream, often accompanied by Arabian Waxbills. A night camp in the dry lower hills produced Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, flighting in to drink after dark and also before dawn. An African Scops Owl was heard "purring" during the night, and a Spotted Eagle Owl was heard calling at dawn. A nightjar sp. was heard churring in mid-June too.

The typical migrants/winterers of the wadi are Green & Common Sandpipers (*Tringa ochropus* and *Actitis hypoleucus*) and Grey Wagtails; *Motacilla cinerea*; overhead, the commonest and most conspicuous migrant is the European Bee-eater, whose flocks pour down the wadi daily in autumn. Far less common but equally characteristic of the wadi is the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. *Michael Evans, Montrose, Llanddiniol, Llanrhystud, Dyfed, SY23 5AN.*

#### RECENT REPORTS

Of the many hundreds of records incorporated into the Atlas in the last 12 months some stick out as being particularly interesting perhaps because of an interesting locality, or the circumstances of breeding. The following are a selection of records which have been received recently - although some refer to previous years.

Ostrich Eggshell fragments were found in

March 1986 by Prof. W. Büttiker in the Wahiba Sands of Oman (c. YB20). This is a new area for such fragments. (It has not yet been determined whether these fragments are fossil, subfossil or recent but there are no historical records of the ostrich from this corner of Arabia).

Red-billed Tropicbird. Approx. 200 pairs were found nesting on Qarneyn Island (SB26) in the southern Arabian Gulf; eggs in December and young until June. (I. Foxall, 1985; *Bull. Emirates Nat. Hist. Group* 27:5-10).

Socotra Cormorant. Approx. 40,000 adults and hundreds of naked young on an island off UAE (VB28) in early January, 1986 (C. Richardson). P.J. Baldwin reports a confirmed observation of a group of 11 at Yanbu al Sinaiyah (EA24) on 31st March 1986; the first records from the northern half of the Red Sea.

Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*. Up to 14 were present at least April-June in 1985 near Ta'izz (KA04), North Yemen, possibly nest building in May and were joined by 2 juveniles in October (D. Perkins). This is especially exciting news as the species has been recorded so rarely in Arabia and is on the verge of extinction at its only known Asiatic breeding colony at Birecik in eastern Turkey.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*. This species keeps turning up in odd places but its status remains uncertain. One was seen near Doha, Qatar in October 1985 (M. Hutton). This was almost certainly an escape but have those that have been seen on the Red Sea coast in recent years been wanderers from Africa?

Lammergeier. A pair nested in north west Saudi Arabia (BB32) during 1986 (R. Warburton).

Bonellis Eagle. A pair in suitable nesting habitat at Wadi Qarakiya (CA32) Saudi Arabia, March 1986 (MCJ).

Sooty Falcon. One was seen near Riyadh on 26 August 1985, at the start of the species' late summer breeding season. (D.A. Hofmann). The first record for central Arabia.

Avocet. Two pairs bred near Riyadh in June 1986. (D.R. Jones)

Kentish Plover. Bred near Hafar al Batin (LB32) in June 1985 (A. Inglis). An unusual inland breeding record.

Eurasian Collared Dove. P.A.D. Hollom reports what is probably the first breeding of this species in Arabia at Kuwait in 1963. Does any one have any earlier dates?

Arabian Woodpecker. This species' distinctive call was heard by two observers in a wadi in Midian (DA29) some 300 k. north of Medina in March 1986 (MCJ). A very considerable extension to the known range of this Arabian endemic species.

Golden Oriole. A pair with young birds near Tabuk (CB33) in May 1984 (R. Warburton).

House Sparrow. None were seen on a three day visit to Abu Dhabi in November 1965 (P.A.D. Hollom). Can anyone shed any light on when they colonised the area?

Rüppells Weaver. Two pairs were nest building near Riyadh on May 1986 (A.J. Stagg) and a single bird was seen near Dubai in May 1985 (J.A.D. Chapman). Escapes are suspected.

Arabian Serin. Recorded in Midian (DA29) in the same place as the Arabian Woodpecker (see above) and also at Khaybar (FA28) in March 1986 (MCJ). This endemic species known range has been extended 500 k. northwards in the last 2 years.

#### FUTURE BREEDERS

Of the 400 or so bird species that regularly occur in Arabia only about half have bred. However, many of the remaining visitors breed in adjacent regions to the peninsula e.g. in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, Iranian deserts or the Horn of Africa. It requires only a small change of conditions e.g. of climate or vegetation, or range extension to result in some of these visitors finding Arabia temporarily suitable for them to breed. (A good example might be the first breeding occurrence this year of the Pale Rock Sparrow in central Arabia - see above). Other species

might exploit habitat changes brought about by agriculture or industry.

Many species that visit Arabia for the winter months or migrate through in spring have started to engage in breeding related activities such as song, display and other courtship actions well before they move out of the area. Such behaviour is always worth following up if it is persistent, especially if conditions appear 'right' for breeding. There are potentially many more birds that can be added to the ABBA breeding list from among these visitors. For example this year on the Harrat Khaybar Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*, Desert Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia minula* and Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* were all singing well in what might be regarded as suitable habitat, the last species was also paired and behaving very territorily and quite probably bred. However, one wonders what a Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* was doing singing daily for several spring weeks this year in reed beds of the Riyadh sewage run-off. (A.J. Stagg et al.).

An account follows of a winter visiting species, the Spanish Sparrow, *Passer hispaniolensis* that nearly managed to breed in Kuwait. It is compiled from a much more detailed report submitted by Victor Sales who was resident in Kuwait for many years. After this a further note by Colin Richardson concerns the Greater Flamingo at Dubai, a species that can nowadays be encountered in flocks of several thousands around Arabian shores, especially in the Gulf. This status contrasts markedly with its comparative rarity some two decades ago. It once bred many years ago in Kuwait and everyone is willing it to breed once more.

#### Spanish Sparrows nearly bred in Kuwait.

Throughout February 1955 over 100 Spanish Sparrows were present in a *Tamarix* and *Prosopis* windbreak near Ahmadi (OA35). From 6 February nest building was observed as was display by males and birds defended partially built nests. By 22 February some 24 nests were occupied and copulation was observed. An examination of the nests on 26 February found some lined with feathers but two days later the colony had been deserted and the birds had left the area, presumably to return north. Closer examination of the nests revealed no eggs had been laid although several appeared to have a finished lining and to be just about ready to receive eggs.

Vic Sales spent 16 years in Kuwait and reports that the Spanish Sparrow is a irregular winter visitor. He saw them 7 winters, usually only in very small numbers. 1955 was the only year that birds engaged in any breeding behaviour. Whatever criteria one adopts to define breeding it is clear that the Spanish Sparrow, on this occasion, came very close to breeding. Perhaps if the weather, food supplies or some other unknown variable had been just that bit more favourable they would have remained a little longer, laid eggs and reared young. This is clearly a species that needs to be watched closely for any breeding activity. It is known to form mixed colonies with the House Sparrow and in March this year, in north west Saudi Arabia, I found a mixed group of House and Spanish Sparrows chattering round a nest colony in acacia trees. I was not able to prove that the Spanish Sparrows were nest building but the House Sparrows with them certainly were.

The Spanish Sparrow winters erratically in the Arabian Gulf from Kuwait to Masirah Island, Oman, but in northern Arabia it is common and widespread in winter, often in large numbers. The birds occurring in northern Arabia are thought to be of the nominate race whereas the pale eastern race *transcaspicus* is the bird that frequents the gulf area and is the race identified by Vic Sales in Kuwait.

The nearest breeding locality for this race is western Iran.

#### Will Flamingos soon breed in Dubai?

Locally recognized as the southern Arabian Gulf's most important 'estuary' site, the mud-flats, which cover over 300 hectares at the head of Dubai's tidal creek, provide a habitat ideal for thousands of wintering and passage waders of all shapes and sizes. Apart from the thousands of Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Little Stint *Calidris minuta*, Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*, Dunlin *C. alpina* and Redshank *Tringa totanus*, a recent phenomenon is the occurrence of a large flock of Greater Flamingo.

The phenomenon is only recent but a great percentage of these birds appear to be resident. In March 1985, the numbers observed reached 1,700 (Moser, 1985; *BTO report*) although at times, between the Autumn of 1984 and the Summer of 1985, the numbers exceeded 2,000.

Earlier records of the Greater Flamingo on Dubai Creek can be compared to recent numbers, by using observations of W. Wyper, from 1970. In September of that year, only one adult was observed. Winter 70/71 brought a further 14 to the creek. By December 1975, 86 immatures and 16 adults were recorded.

Later observers show that by March 1979, the number had risen to 260. Intermediate records show the yearly increment was slow but steady, although in those early years hunting was widespread and the flamingos' size made them easy game, thus disturbing any potential colonial pattern forming. As the winter numbers increased to several hundred, the summer number increased proportionately, and by June 1984, over 350 birds were apparently 'resident' on the mudflats (pers.obs.). This was the largest single summering flock of Greater Flamingo recorded in the Arabian Gulf up to that time. However, no breeding had been recorded. This information was passed to the Dubai Wildlife Research Centre, and received with great interest. Headed by Dr. Joe Platt, the Research Centre was set up by His Highness, Shaikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to manage various projects, including a captive breeding programme for the endangered Houbara.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) were then invited to Dubai by Shaikh Mohammed to undertake a study of the flamingos at the head of the creek, with the aim of preparing a report on their future management. Dr. Mike Moser, the BTO's estuaries officer, spent some weeks in March 1985 studying the area, and was generally impressed. He found that some of the flamingo colony were displaying, mating and even nest-building, but what was lacking was a suitable breeding site. The BTO's subsequent report advised that an artificial island be constructed, as had been successfully done in the Camargue region of France some years earlier. Within weeks of receiving the report the project commenced, funded in full by the Dubai Government and by the first week in August the finishing touches to 300 man-made mud nests were made as a 'stimulus' on the lee-side of the 300 ft. long, kidney shaped artificial island. The island was thought capable of supporting up to 1,500 breeding pairs.

An important proviso in the report, and one welcomed without reservation, was the requirement to minimise all forms of disturbance around the island. To the advantage of the wildlife on and around the mud flats, this has now been stringently applied and as a result, along with a steady settling of the Greater Flamingo population, there are hopes that the habitat may encourage the nesting of summer visiting terns and a further increase in the resident Kentish Plover population.

The breeding requirements of the Greater Flamingo are very specialised, perhaps only 20 colonies are occupied in any one year worldwide, so it is important that the Dubai authorities understand that this is a long term project and no guarantees exist of them breeding in the first season.

The Dubai Natural History Group has a hard-core of birdwatchers and regular observations are made of bird activities on the mud flats. The spring of 1986 indicated a slight reduction on last year's flamingo numbers, and although all conditions were met for a colony to establish itself, no breeding had occurred in the 1986 season by August, although displaying took place throughout the spring. Nonetheless, the interest generated from the flamingo project has served to highlight the advance that can be made in conservation in developing countries and incentive for other wildlife groups throughout Arabia to promote conservation must be derived from the final recognition of the international importance of Dubai's tidal mud flats.

My grateful thanks go to Mrs. Effie Warr for making available to me documented observation records prior to 1980.

*Colin Richardson, c/o John R. Harris and Partners, P.O. Box 2825, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.*

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#### EXPEDITIONS NEWS

##### In the High Yemen - The Autumn 1985 OSME Expedition.

From 9 October to 4 December 1985 the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME) conducted an expedition to the Yemen Arab Republic under the leadership of Dr. Michael Rands of the International Council for Bird Preservation, and Richard Porter of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. This note briefly describes some of the expedition's discoveries and sketches some considerations relating to the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* (ABBA), for which data were collected. (Use is also made of the author's additional observations in the YAR in Spring 1986). The expedition's research objectives included a study of the composition and habitat selection of bird communities on the coastal plain of the Tihama; the collection of data on the little-known south-west Arabian endemic birds and an assessment of the significance of the YAR as part of the route used by diurnal raptors migrating from Eurasia to Africa.

Studies were also undertaken of the status and conservation requirements of Arabian Bustard, including detailed observations and filming of the birds' display (hitherto undescribed) and a small population of Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*, recently discovered on the grazing marshes around Ta'izz in the south of the country. Recommendations for the conservation of these species are currently in preparation for submission to international conservation bodies and the government of the YAR. Available evidence suggests that the YAR may be the long-undiscovered wintering ground of the dwindling Turkish Bald Ibis population. If, as seems likely from the number of individuals involved, this is the only wintering ground, then the need for further conservation measures to help the species is desperate indeed since the marshes, where they were found, are now undergoing wholesale destruction as they are deep-ploughed to render them suitable for crop production. The next few years will show whether the solution of this ancient ornithological mystery heralds better prospects for the salvation of the population or enables conservationists to bear witness more closely to its demise: currently its wintering habitat is shrinking by the month.

The expedition recorded 276 species, including 15 not previously known from the country and two new to the Arabian Peninsula. Species new to the YAR were Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Harlequin Quail, Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*, Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*, Pin-tailed Snipe *Gallinago stenura*, Olive Pigeon *Columba arquatrix*, Hume's Tawny Owl, Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus*, Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*, Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, Wattled Starling and Vitelline Masked Weaver *Ploceus vitellinus* (though at the time of writing this species awaits final confirmation by examination of skins).

The occurrence of most new birds was not entirely surprising, given the paucity of previous ornithological studies in YAR. Many were Palearctic-African migrants or off-season wanderers from elsewhere in the Middle East. Certain species merit comment in the Arabian context, however. Hume's Tawny Owl, since discovered at another site in the YAR by M. Evans and now known to be widespread in Arabia, though local, could be common in the mountains of the south-west as much suitable habitat exists and it is easily overlooked. Harlequin Quail is an opportunistic, rainy-season breeder previously recorded from south-west Saudi Arabia; Wattled Starling is a highly nomadic species, frequently following locust swarms. It is regularly recorded in Oman, where Pheasant-tailed Jacana is also a regular winter visitor in small numbers. The two species new to the Arabian Peninsula - Olive Pigeon (though details of earlier observations from south-west Saudi Arabia are currently in press) and Vitelline Masked Weaver are puzzling: are they recent immigrants from the Afrotropical region or simply scarce species previously overlooked?

A further objective of the expedition was collection of data for the ABBA project. This undertaking was administered by myself, with all participants contributing records on a daily basis. Within the western two-thirds of the country, which contains the greatest diversity of habitat types, coverage by squares exceeded 70%. It may be of use and interest here to briefly mention some of the trends recognised and outline certain factors which complicate the application of the ABBA Breeding Evidence Code, because breeding strategies in the YAR differ from those found in the temperate Palearctic, where most atlas schemes using similar codes have been conducted in the past.

A striking aspect of the timing of breeding seasons in the YAR (thus south-west Arabia) is the lack of the marked synchronization found at higher latitudes where optimal bioclimatic conditions for reproduction occur within a relatively discrete (temperate) season. Here, the breeding season is more prolonged with breeding regimes corresponding to conditions in (tropical) sub-Saharan Africa where rainfall (rather than temperature or day-length) is the proximate cue initiating breeding activity. (Indeed, this fact is a secondary argument for assigning extreme south-west Arabia to the Afrotropical realm, in view of the relative proportions of avifaunal elements occurring therein).

Many highland species which feed their young on seed and/or insect-based food breed over a remarkably extended period, either from the onset of spring rains in March to the cessation of autumn rains in September, or within the two rainy periods. Examples include Palm Dove, Yemen Serin, Arabian Serin and Yemen Warbler which actively sings in both rainy periods, though further proof is needed as a nest has never been found. Nonetheless, it is clear that the onset of spring rains corresponds with the period in which most highland

species commence breeding activity, are most noticeably territorial, and are in active song. It is also at this time that migrants spending the off-season in the Afrotropical region and migrating to Arabia to breed, such as Bruce's Green Pigeon, Grey-headed Kingfisher and Amethyst Starling, begin to arrive. In contrast, it appears that in the lowland Tihama (an entirely different ecological zone), certain species, e.g. Black-crowned Finch Lark may breed throughout the year when conditions are suitable, thus having no distinct breeding 'season' for the population as a whole. Many species may be multi-brooded but it is difficult to be sure of this because different individuals breed at different times throughout a prolonged period of breeding activity.

The complexities outlined here - all well-known as aspects of tropical breeding regimes - have received little emphasis in the literature of Arabian ornithology. This is partially because so little is known about Arabian breeding seasons but probably also because consensus regarding the correct avifaunal classification of south-west Arabia has, perhaps until recently, eluded ornithologists. Therefore, the ABBA data collector seeking to document the categories of breeding evidence primarily devised for atlas schemes conducted in temperate latitudes, where breeding seasons are discrete and well-known, should be wary of unwarranted assumptions. Clearly, there can be few problems with the spatial aspects of ABBA work - it is when seeking to identify the length of time during which breeding occurs that erroneous conclusions might easily be drawn. Because observations at almost any time of year may apply to the breeding season, it is important not to simply assume that this is so. An extremely conservative attitude toward all categories of 'probably breeding' in the ABBA scheme, particular where such evidence is recorded frequently without any further confirmation of breeding (as was often the case throughout the expedition) is the best way to prevent it receiving erroneous data.

Full details of the expedition's research, including ABBA work, will appear in the final report, currently in preparation, and also in a special edition of the OSME journal *Sandgrouse*. A short promotional video has been produced concerning the expedition's work and this is available on short-term loan to interested parties. A preliminary report is also available and can be obtained from Dr. Michael Rands, OSME Yemen Expedition, c/o International Council for Bird Preservation, 219c Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 ODL, England.

*Rodney Martins, 75 Stafford Street, Norwich, Norfolk, NR2 3BG.*

#### Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985/86

The difficulty of moving and living safely within the 15,000 square kilometers of the Wahiba Sands of Oman (c. WB20) had hindered prolonged scientific study of this region until 1985, when HM Sultan Qaboos authorised the Armed Forces to provide logistical support to the earth, human and life scientists of the joint Oman/Royal Geographical Society Wahiba Sands Project. As ornithologist and herpetologist in the biological team led by Dr Paul Munton I was therefore able to penetrate and live further amongst the dunes than before.

Although few of the 90-odd bird species seen here are true desert-adapted species, I found belts of ghaf or *Prosopis* trees which act as corridors for the passage of many migrants and visitors. Here I discovered evidence of breeding by Long-legged Buzzard, Grey Francolin, Eurasian Collared, Turtle and Palm Doves, Little and Bruce's Scops Owls, Indian Roller and several others; for some of these it was a significant extension of their previously known breeding range within Oman, and for Rufous Bush Chat it was the first proof of nesting in

Oman.

The scientific results of this four month survey will be presented at a symposium at the new Sultan Qaboos University in April 1987, and published in the Journal of Oman Studies. The splendid support given to the project by Oman and individual sponsors has already made it a model of success by co-operation.

Michael Gallagher, P.O. Box 668, Muscat, Oman

#### Red Sea and Indian Ocean Expedition 1987/88

Richard Speir is organising a series of interlocking marine expeditions in 1987-88 based on his 13.25 m ferrocement ketch *Gaia Quest*. One sector is planned to include the southern Red Sea and the passage to Socotra, where it is hoped to spend some time. Many other parts of the Indian Ocean, generally north of a line from Madagascar to Sri Lanka, are to be visited. At the present time, plans and itineraries are very fluid and teams of about 4 can book a sector or a series of islands for the study of seabirds, cetaceans, benthic communities, coral reefs or any other relevant marine or island study. The possibility of an ABBA ornithological team taking the southern Red Sea 'leg' in summer 1987, is being seriously investigated. This trip would be for about a month (June-July) and would probably be based on al Hudaydah, YAR. The expedition would aim to visit the little visited islands in the middle of the southern Red Sea, e.g. Zubayr, Zuqar, Hanish etc. to census breeding seabirds. Anyone interested who is fit, (it will be extremely hot), experienced with seabird censuses and can afford the per capita cost of about £1200 (plus airfare) should write to M.C.J. for details. Those who are interested in organising their own expedition over another leg can obtain further details from R.P.G. Speir, c/o Jackie Lemlin, U.S. Embassy, Box 9123, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

#### BREEDING SEASONS.

In his report on the OSME YAR expedition above, Rod Martins makes many very valid comments on some pitfalls of the ABBA Breeding Evidence Code, especially in respect of south-west Arabian 'breeding seasons'. Atlasers should keep in mind that the B.E.C. must be used as a generalized guide not as a set of hard and fast rules. There are many exceptions to the code at species level and some groups of birds can cause special problems, for example seabirds tend to breed at different seasons to most other birds or in sub-annual cycles like the Brown Booby and possibly the Socotra Cormorant. Other birds breed all the year round or on an irregular opportunistic basis. In an effort to help contributors to assess local breeding seasons for individual species, a new edition of Form 2 is in preparation which will show dates of eggs and young in the nest and comment on regional differences in the breeding season.

#### PROGRESS SO FAR: BROWN-NECKED RAVEN

One species that appears to have a remarkably consistent breeding season is the Brown-necked Raven, the only species that may breed throughout the Atlas coverage. The great majority of nests have eggs in February and young in March; from Tabuk to the Farasan Islands, (IA10) and from Oman to Kuwait. It is clear that some eggs must be laid in January but when does egg laying finish? Birds have for example been seen on nests in April and May, stick carrying in April and food carrying in May. Do birds nesting at high altitudes lay later than others, as some records suggest?

In view of the Brown-necked Raven's widespread distribution it is planned to show the ABBA draft map of this species in each issue as a general indication of project progress.

The up to date picture of Brown-necked Raven

records actually stored on data sheets so far is shown at Fig. 3. The picture is biased at present as it mainly reflects reports received since 1984 and includes very little material from the literature. Nevertheless, by examining the squares where the bird has not yet been recorded, contributors can see, at a glance, those squares that they may need to give attention to. An empty square probably means the area has not yet been 'atlassed'. On the contrary a confirmed breeding record should not be interpreted to mean that a square does not need further attention, as there are likely to be plenty of other species not yet recorded in the same square. Also, duplicate breeding records of Brown-necked Raven would always be valued, as the project aims to collect as full a picture of the breeding activity and nidification of each species as possible. The more records collected the more precise and authoritative ABBA files will be.

#### FAN-TAILED RAVEN

Records incorporated so far for this species are shown as Fig. 4 for comparison with the Brown-necked Raven. Although records are now here near complete one can see more clearly with this species how the draft distribution maps are starting to take shape. The Fan-tailed Raven is a bird of high mountains, especially high cliff areas. The map so far clearly shows how distribution is generally confined to the mountain chain of western Arabia. However, the map also illustrates several other interesting points. The records in central Arabia around Riyadh are probably part of a wider distribution along the Tuwaiq Escarpment and those of the north centre form an isolated area for this bird (Jebels Aja and Selma) where they were found for the first time this spring. The southern Oman records probably do not represent an 'island' of occurrence but merely demonstrate the lack of records throughout the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), where the species is likely to be widespread. The only significant mountain area where the bird is not found is northern Oman and UAE. These mountains are separated from the southern Oman range of the species by 600 k. of desert plain. The species has clearly not bridged this gap, from its presumed evolutionary centre somewhere to the south-west, probably in the Abyssinian Highlands.

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Fig 2. The Brown-necked Raven may breed in all Atlas squares.

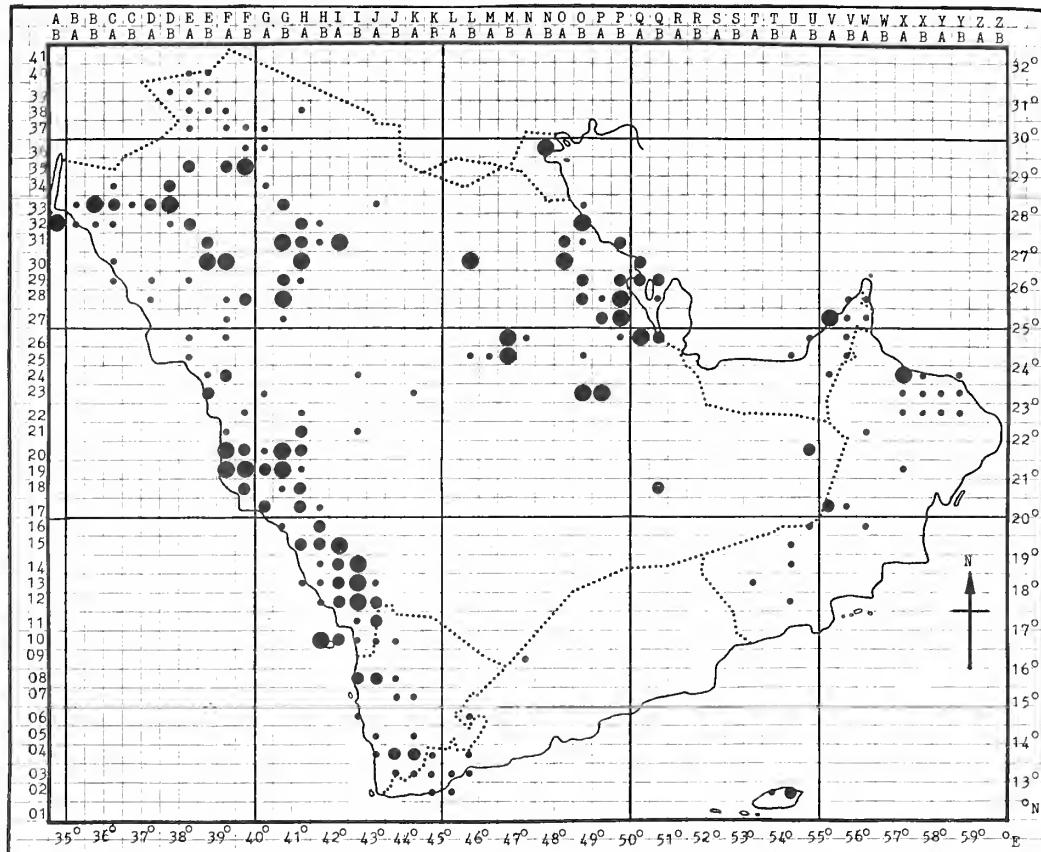


Fig 3.

Brown-necked Raven :records to date.

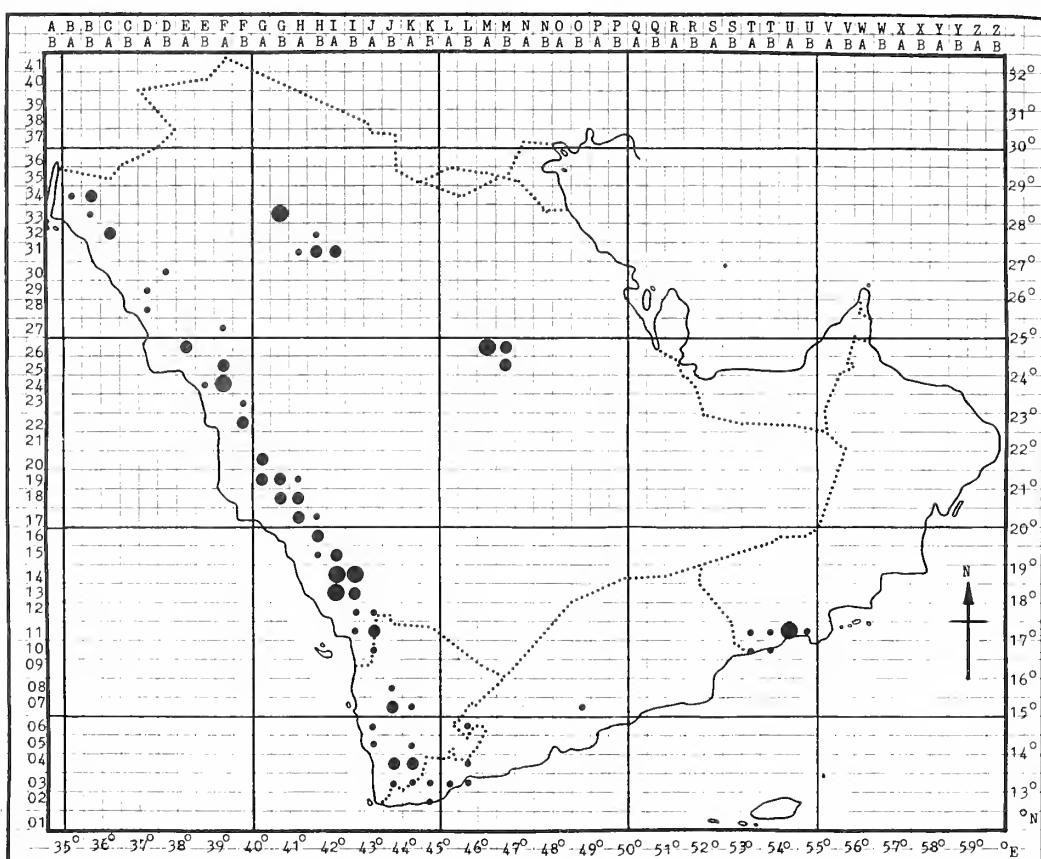


Fig 4.

Fan-tailed Raven :records to date.

#### ORGANISATIONS, SOCIETIES AND PUBLICATIONS CONCERNED WITH BIRDS AND NATURE IN ARABIA

A list appeared in *Phoenix* 2 of the present day societies and groups concerned with the flora and fauna of Arabia. Some additions and changes to this list can now be made, as follows.

##### The Historical Association of Oman

This association, which was formed in 1971, organises filmshows, lectures, field trips and natural history forums. Membership stands

at about 420; subscriptions are RO.5 per year. (P.O. Box 6941, Ruwi, Oman).

##### Emirates Natural History Group (Al Ain)

Founded in 1979 this society has some 250 members and produces a monthly newsletter and meets usually twice per month. (P.O. Box 16027, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE).

##### Dubai Natural History Group

This new society, founded in 1985 has now produced the first six of its newsletters *The*

*Gazelle*. Details of membership from Linda Coupland, P.O. Box 5666, Dubai, UAE. (N.B. This past summer the Emirates Natural History Groups in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain and the DNHG have discussed ways of cooperating, possibly by some form of amalgamation, to enable more efficient use of resources and perhaps more prestigious publications).

#### Nature and Ornithological Society of Yemen

The Ornithological Society of North Yemen changed its name and widened its scope of interest in 1986 to include all aspects of nature and the environment of the Yemen Arab Republic whilst keeping a special interest in birds. It also hopes to cover interest in and developments concerning the flora and fauna of South Yemen. Address: c/o Mark Halliday, P.O. Box 5713, Ta'izz, Yemen Arab Republic.

#### Gazelle: The Palestinian Biological Bulletin (ISSN 0178-6288)

This Arabic publication which has appeared irregularly since 1983, covers all subjects pertaining to Arabian and Middle East zoology. Available from Norman Khalaf, 6601 Hanweiler, Uhland Str. 6, West Germany.

#### Sinai Newsletter

Prepared by the Sierra Club International, Earthcare Centre and the Holyland Conservation Fund. Relevant to all aspects of the environment and nature conservation in the Sinai area and has carried several references to the Egyptian Administered, Saudi Arabian islands of Tiran and Sinafir. (Now in the ABBA coverage). Details available from Dr. Bertel Bruun, 969 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10028, USA.

#### DATA PASSED ON

One important feature of the project is a commitment to pass on information collected to where it can be used, for example to those researching an aspect of Arabian ornithology or concerned with a particular species or group of species, within the scope of the Atlas. This must be an important function of the project as the data collection phase of the project is likely to span several years before an 'Atlas' can be published. Not to use the information in any way before publication would be a great loss to all. Although species files and draft maps are nowhere near complete yet (for example probably much less than 5% of the available literature records have been incorporated so far), a considerable store of information is available to those who have a use for it. During the last 12 months information has been passed on to the following for various publications and research purposes: M.I. Evans (N.Yemen) Red-breasted Wheatear; M.D. Gallagher, (Oman) Blackstart and Abdin's Stork; Great Bustard Trust, (UK) Houbara and Arabian Bustards and D.T. Lees-Smith, (UK) Yemen Warbler. A.J. Stagg of Riyadh was sent information on all species breeding in the Riyadh Area of Saudi Arabia for a regional checklist which will appear soon. In addition details of all species from Ostrich to buntings have been used by P.A.D. Hollom to help prepare draft maps for use in the new Middle East fieldguide. This latter publication promises to be the most exciting publication ever to cover all Arabian birds and it has been a great pleasure for the Atlas to assist this work.

Enquiries are welcomed from readers who need information on the breeding or distribution of a particular species, or the birds of a finite area in Arabia.

#### NEW BOOKS.

#### Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours By T.B. Larsen (1984)

Not of much direct relevance to birds but an-

other excellently illustrated work concerning an aspect of Arabian zoology which many ABBA contributors will want to have on their bookshelf. The best guide available to many Arabian butterflies. 160 pages, 120 photos and 23 plates depicting 500 or so specimens of 147 different butterflies. Available in larger bookshops. Price unknown. Published by Stacey International, 128 Kensington Church Street, London W8 4BH (ISBN 0905743369).

#### An Introduction to the Vegetation of Yemen By A.Al-Hubaishi and K. Muller-Hohenstein (1984)

There is very little published on the flora of the Y.A.R. and this compact little book is probably the best available. The introductory chapter deals with the main families and genera and their distribution and provides a foundation on the importance of geology, geomorphology, climate and soils. There is comment on man's influence on natural plant cover through agriculture, grazing and wood cutting and the introduction of new plant species. The main part of the book deals with the six natural regions into which the country has been divided and is well illustrated by diagrams and sketches of plants found at each altitude and type of terrain. This is a low budget, but serious, introduction to the subject and is not a coffee table book. It is very readable even for non-botanists and contains very much relevant to the study of birds and their habitats in south-west Arabia. Text in English and Arabic, 27 colour plates of habitats and 124 colour plates of plants; pp 209 (+ 70 Arabic text). Available from TZ-Verlagsgesellschaft mbh, Postfach 29, D6101 Roseldorf 1, West Germany. Price quoted as £3 but this seems far too low. (ISBN 3.88085.248.0.)

#### Flora of Kuwait Vol 1: Dicotyledoneae by H.A. Daoud and A. Al-Rawi (1985)

This is the first of two volumes of a study of the flora of Kuwait, the result of many years of painstaking research. When complete, *The Flora of Kuwait* will be a standard field guide and reference work for the region. This first volume introduces the families of the Dicotyledonous plants, with the exception of the *Compositae* family: this will appear in Volume 2 with the Monocotyledonous plants. The identification and documentation of the botanical wealth of Kuwait in this book will be of value to all those interested in exploring the natural resources of north east Arabia. It is as equally relevant to students of plant taxonomy as it is to ornithologists and conservationists engaged in field work in the area, who need to be able to determine each species. This is a technical book which would nevertheless grace any coffee table. 200 pages of text are devoted to a detailed description of the plant species arranged under 37 families and then within the genus. There are also general descriptions of each family and genus with keys to genera and species as necessary. A good index of botanical names to species level and the English names of families is very useful but the introductory sections, limited to only a few paragraphs covering the climate and topography of Kuwait, spread over only three pages, is inadequate. Beautifully illustrated by 48 full colour pages depicting 248 photographs of plants, and 14 line drawings. (283 pages in all). Price £48. Published by and available from Routledge & Kegan Paul, 14 Leicester Square, London WC2H 7PH (ISBN 0.7103.0075.1).

#### Bird Census and Atlas Studies by K. Taylor R.J. Fuller and P.C. Lack (1985)

This 437 page, soft back, book presents the proceedings of the *Eighth International Conference on Bird Census and Atlas Work* which was hosted by the British Trust for Ornithology in September 1983. It contains over 40 major papers and more than 20 minor articles and notes on a variety of census and atlas subjects. Anyone in Arabia who is contemplating a pop-

ulation study or a detailed investigation of avian communities, would find much in this book to stimulate and assist them, especially in respect of study techniques and survey methods. Contains plenty of maps, tables, graphs and histograms. Many papers are very readable but others might be of more interest to statisticians than ornithologists! Available from the B.T.O. Beech Grove, Tring, Hertfordshire, England: (Price £10.00; includes postage).

#### The Red Sea by Dr. P. Vine (1985)

This is a most attractive full colour introduction to the Red Sea, its history, biology and exploitation. The whole basin is dealt with from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Bab al-Mandeb but there is in-depth treatment of the Suakin Archipelago, Sudan and the Farasans group of islands, Saudi Arabia, in which places the author has studied the marine environment for a total of over 8 years. It is profusely illustrated throughout with many dramatic colour photos, at least one per page. The first section of the book deals with Red Sea history, including its prehistory, the various political changes in this strategically important region and its scientific exploration. There are then a number of chapters on the flora and fauna of intertidal, shallow water, coral reef and island biotopes plus two chapters devoted entirely to fish and birds. I was very pleased to find that the latter concentrated on breeding birds and contained quite a lot of previously unpublished information. The birds section includes some attractive photos of unusual breeding species, such as Brown Booby, Pink-backed Pelican and the Common Noddy. Odd references to birds occur throughout all the other chapters of the book. A final section deals with marine traditions, including boat building and fishing, and subjects such as navigation, communications, wrecks and conservation. A highly recommended introduction to the magnificent marine environment and birds of the Red Sea. (128 pp). Price £24, available from bookshops and Immel Publishing, Ely House, 37, Dover Street, London, W1X 3RB (ISBN 0.907151.-10.8).

#### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

##### OSME Annual General Meeting

The 1987 Annual General Meeting of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East is due to take place at the British Museum (Natural History), South Kensington, London on Saturday 4th July. Further details of the venue are to be announced but the main business is likely to begin about 2.00 p.m.

##### Symposium on the potential of wildlife conservation in Saudi Arabia: Riyadh, 16-18 February 1986

Organised by the National Commission of Wildlife Conservation and Development (NCWCD), this symposium will be primarily concerned with the present day status of wildlife in Saudi Arabia. Identifying the conservation needs of species, the means of providing such needs, and integrating wildlife conservation into the economic development plans for the Kingdom. Further details available from:- Saud Al-Faisal, Managing Director, NCWCD, P.O. Box 61681, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

##### Dubai Shorebird Project

Mick Green, Chris Thomas and John Uttley of Durham University will be visiting the UAE in October and November 1986 to make a study of the birds of Khor Dubai in collaboration with Dubai Wildlife Research Centre. One of their aims is to catch, ring and colour-mark waders. Anybody seeing such birds this winter or spring 1987 should notify Dubai Shorebird Project, Dept. of Zoology, Univ. of Durham, South Rd., Durham DH1 3LE U.K. Details will be sent to observers by return.

#### Fauna of Saudi Arabia

*Fauna of Saudi Arabia* is a continuous series on the animal life of Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, which is published by the Natural History Museum Basel, Switzerland and the Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration (MEPA) of Saudi Arabia. The editors, Prof. Dr. W. Büttiker, Jeddah, and Dr. F. Krupp, Mainz, in collaboration with over 150 eminent specialists worldwide are continuing this series which was commenced in 1979. The contributions to the 7 volumes so far mainly cover taxonomy, faunistics, zoogeography, ecology and animal conservation. The 500-600 plus pages of each volume hold numerous drawings, photographs and colour plates, and are hardbound. Available from Karger Libri A.G. P.O. Box CH-4009 Basel, Switzerland.

#### Research Project: Threats to the White Stork on Migration.

In January 1986, WWF-Germany and ICBP started a joint project to investigate the threats to the White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* on its migration routes and in its wintering areas. Major aims of the project will be:

- to analyse factors threatening the White Stork directly and indirectly in the different countries on its migration route.
- to analyse the extent of application of biocides and their direct and indirect effects on migrating White Storks.
- to draw together a list of areas which are of major importance for migrating White Stork.
- to produce comprehensive documentation, containing results of the project and suggestions for an international conservation strategy for the White Stork.

Collaborators are needed who can submit information and observations from Southern Europe, the Middle East, Arabia and Africa. People interested in cooperating should contact the project leader as soon as possible for further details. The first of the project's newsletter (16 pp) is now available to those interested. WWF-Germany/ICBP White Stork Project, Dr. Holger Schulz, Am Lindenbergs 1, D-3331 LELM., West Germany

#### OSME SITES REGISTER SCHEME

In 1983 the Ornithological Society of the Middle East introduced the above scheme to ensure that important ornithological sites in the Middle East region are identified and catalogued. It is a long term project which will create a data bank for conservation research and identify population, species and environmental changes. Most contributors to the project are likely to be amateurs living in, or visiting the area, although no doubt a lot of very valuable work will be done by organised parties and expeditions. Under the scheme a 'site' is left very much to the interpretation of individual contributors and their own idea of what is locally important. For example, a site could be a range of mountains, a valley, an island or a single sewage lagoon. A site might only be important for migrants or the breeding locality of an endangered species, or a representative area for a particular avifauna. There is a format for reports which include such details as, size of site, location, habitat, threats (real and potential) as well as the birds that occur. Ideally sites will be reported on after detailed study by an observer over a prolonged period but remote sites may be reported on after only a single visit.

There is clearly much common interest between ABBA and the OSME Sites Register Scheme. Atlas contributors may well find sites register work can be fitted in conveniently with atlas-sing work. Those interested in the scheme will find details in *OSME Bulletins* 10 and 14 (Autumn 1983 and Spring 1985) or can obtain instructions and a supply of forms by writing to Dr. Mike Rands, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy,

Bedfordshire, England. Those who submit site reports for Arabia are asked to consider sending a copy for ABBA files. Authors might also like to consider writing a narrative account of their site for publication in *Phoenix* under the 'Sites of Interest' column.

#### FOR SALE

*The Birds of South West Saudi Arabia 1985*  
By A.J. Stagg

A 59 page report and systematic list - for a review see *OSME Bulletin* No. 13. Available from the author, P.O. Box 1732, Riyadh 11441 Saudi Arabia. Price £4. (or SR20) includes postage.

*Oil Pollution of the Egyptian Red Sea and Gulf of Suez and its Effects on Birds, (1984)* by P.C. Heathcote, D. Parr, M.C. Jennings and R. Frost.

A 72 page report (A4) on oil pollution observations and birds seen during an expedition in Spring 1983, to the islands at the Mouth of the Gulf of Suez, and along the Egyptian Red Sea shore. Price £5. (plus £3. if wanted airmail). Available from M.C.J.

*The Birds of Saudi Arabia: A checklist (1981)*  
by M.C. Jennings

This 112 page booklet officially sold out two years ago but a very few 'imperfect' copies are still available (e.g. odd pages upside down, or pages in wrong order but complete). Price £6.50 inclusive of postage (£8 airmail). Available from M.C.J.

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#### 10,000th RECORD RECEIVED.

The 10,000th Atlas record was processed in July 1986. The total is comprised of some 7650 observer reports, 1700 literature records and 650 museum records. The literature records represent only a very small part of the potential material available from published sources, but this part of the project can take a back seat whilst the majority of time and effort, in the early years, is concentrated on current contributors' records. The museum records are selected from about 1500 Arabian specimens examined so far and perhaps represent about 5-10% of the total available worldwide.

#### MORE RECORDS WANTED.

Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, and who have not yet received the instructions and a set of record forms, are urged to make contact. Old records are especially valuable. It should be noted that although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is sought; presence and possible breeding information is just as valuable.

#### POPULATION DENSITY & HABITAT CENSUS FORMS

The Atlas is primarily a project to determine spatial distribution of birds. However, it is only half the answer to know where a bird occurs and one would also like to know what habitats it prefers and how numerous it is in the places that it is found. To try to build up a reference bank of information on such subjects as, the spectrum of species present in each habitat, the numbers of individuals at comparable sites (and from year to year), the range of habitats in which they occur etc., a simple census scheme has been devised and is now under trial. In the scheme observers are asked to count all birds observed on a transect line, breeding activities at the time of the survey and categorize the habitat, listing any particular features, problems or threats in the area. The scheme is based on a half hour transect of the chosen

site and it can be done anywhere, town, country or coast. Those interested in doing such surveys should write for details. (N.B. The note on Pale Rock Sparrow above gives a small illustration of how these transects surveys can be put to use in providing comparative data from different areas).

#### DONATIONS, SPONSORSHIP AND FINANCE

There were high hopes in early 1986 of gaining full financial support for the project. However, sponsorship plans for the Atlas, like so many other projects, fell victim to massive expenditure cuts in the region, which became necessary with the huge drop in oil revenues a few months ago. Therefore the project still lacks a sponsor, financial security and a computer! It is hoped that readers, friends and atlassers will continue to provide the generous financial support that they have done in the past. Since the issue of *Phoenix* 2 the following have most generously provided money to help the project. All these sums are most gratefully acknowledged:-

Anon, £15; Bahrain Natural History Society, £100; D. Barnes, (UK) £10; Prof. Dr. W. Büttiker, (Saudi Arabia) S.R. 200; J.A.D. Chapman (Dubai), £15; A. Dixon (Saudi Arabia), £5; M. Elwonger (Saudi Arabia), £10; D. Foster (Oman), £25; D.A. Hoffman (Saudi Arabia), \$20; P. Holt (Switzerland) £5; Dr. D.R. James, (Saudi Arabia), £25; D. Le Mesurier (Saudi Arabia) £6; J. Palfrey (Saudi Arabia) £15; Qatar Natural History Society £50; R.A. Richardson (Oman) £5; B. Sawallesh (USA) \$5; and A.J. Stagg (Saudi Arabia) £25.

Costs since *Phoenix* 2 (but excluding cost of *Phoenix* 3), have amounted to approximately £620. Some of the difference between income from donations and expenditure has been made up by subscription orders for *Phoenix*.

#### HOW TO OBTAIN THE PHOENIX

The *Phoenix* is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to correspondents and benefactors. A bundle of every issue is also passed to each society or group active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £10 (\$16) for the next five issues, i.e. numbers 4 to 8. *Phoenix* nos. 1 & 2 are available at £1.) There are not yet enough subscription orders to make this newsletter self financing and more orders are invited. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing an order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds over five years. Any profit will go towards ABBA administrative costs.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PHOENIX

Short articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. Notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports etc., are all free. All submissions should be typed double spaced with wide margins.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

Fig. 1; Brown Booby, Sherif Baha el Din. Fig. 2; Brown-necked Raven, C.J.F. Coombes. Maps, MCJ. Logo, Keith Brockie. Birthe Jennings and Janet Stagg typed the text and Effie Warr and Phillip Hollow made many helpful comments on the final draft.

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#### ADDRESS

All correspondence to the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* and *The Phoenix* should be sent to Michael C. Jennings, Co-ordinator ABBA, Moonraker Cottage, 1, Eastcourt, Burbage, Wiltshire SN8 3AG. England.